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Portrait of a nation: Depardon, France, photography

Edward Welch

Abstract

In 2003, Raymond Depardon was commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture to tour the country and produce a photographic portrait of the nation. By the time of its completion in 2008, the project will have been funded to the tune of some €400,000. This article investigates Depardon's photographic 'Tour de France'. Its aim in the first instance is to explore the images of the country he has produced on his travels; but in doing so, it addresses the broader set of questions raised by the project about the place of photography in the contemporary French cultural order. Firstly, it considers the central role ascribed to photography by the country's cultural and political institutions as a way of tracking and representing national identity and regional difference. Secondly, it investigates what the project reveals about Depardon's own place in France's cultural and photographic star system, as he transforms himself into an itinerant, state-sponsored investigator of that identity.

Keywords: national identity; regional identity; space; travel; Mission France; DATAR

In 2004, the documentary photographer and filmmaker Raymond Depardon embarked on the first stage of a journey around France. This was to be no ordinary tour, however. Scheduled to last four years, the aim of Depardon's 'Mission France' is to produce what he describes as an 'état des lieux photographique du territoire français' ['a photographic inventory of the French territory'].¹ The project is significant not only in terms of its scale and ambition – Depardon will attempt to cover the whole of the country during the period of the commission – but also in terms of the investment it represents. By the time of its completion in 2008, to be marked by an exhibition in Paris, the project will have been funded to the tune of €200,000 by the French Ministry of Culture, with additional sponsorship of €200,000 coming from the French arm of HSBC bank. According to the Ministry of Culture, 'pour une commande publique individuelle et photographique, son ampleur et sa durée sont exceptionnelles' (Guerrin 2004: 28) ['It is rare for the government to commission a project of this length and scope from a single individual, particularly one which involves photography']. Yet this is not in fact the first time that the French state has turned to photography as a means of exploring the nation and its identity. Depardon's photographic 'Tour de France' follows on from other similarly comprehensive projects, the most notable of which was the 'Mission photographique de la DATAR'. Commissioned by the Délégation à l'aménagement et à l'action régionale, an inter-ministerial planning body established by the Gaullist government in 1963, the 'Mission photographique de la DATAR' – in which Depardon was also

involved – took place over five years between 1984 and 1989. It set out to portray a landscape emerging from the twenty-year programme of urban and infrastructural development co-ordinated by the planning body. In the case of both the DATAR project, and Depardon's own 'Mission France', the investment in photography is as much cultural as it is economic. It indicates a certain belief in the medium as a powerful and illuminating way to articulate and represent the nation and its spaces. More especially, in the case of the 'Mission France', it indicates a belief in the distinctive vision of Depardon's eye and his ability to reveal things about the country that would otherwise remain invisible.

While Depardon's 'mission' certainly remains unfinished at the time of writing, both its modalities and its tensions have already been crystallized by the way in which the project has unfolded in its first three years. My first aim in this article is thus to consider the portrait of the nation which Depardon has begun to draw, and which has taken shape in the series of exhibitions staged in regions he has already visited. I examine in particular the insights it offers into the privileged and intricate relationship between photography and national identity. But I go on to argue that the significance of his project lies in the conjunction of elements it brings together: the combination of Depardon, France and photography is itself revealing of the role and status of photography in the contemporary French cultural order. Moreover, as we begin to tease out the tensions inherent in Depardon's activity as an itinerant, state-sponsored investigator of national identity, we realize that it is a status which is not without its problems.

Photography, travel and national identity

In his well-known discussion of the formation of nation states and national identity, Benedict Anderson underlines the fundamental role played by print culture in facilitating the spread of a common language across geographical space, and thereby helping to establish among populations dispersed in various ways (geographically, socially, ethnically) a sense of belonging to and participating in the same political entity (Anderson 1991: 37–46). The slow consolidation of the relationship between linguistic identity and political identity, and the coalescence of those who share a common language into what he terms the 'imagined community' of the nation, was finally enshrined by the French Revolution of 1789. For the first time, the leaders of the new Republic defined national identity in terms of the ability and necessity of all the country's citizens to speak a single language (Lodge 1993: 213–16). But since the nineteenth century, print culture has been supplemented – and arguably displaced by – visual culture in general, and by the photographic image in particular, as the primary medium through which we are encouraged to imagine the *polis* and our place within it. As Louis Kaplan notes, 'in the modern period – the period when both the nation state and the medium of photography have been instituted and have flourished – photographic images have externalized and realized how we imagine community, so it does not exist in the mind's eye alone' (Kaplan 2005: xv). While the simultaneous development of the nation state and the photographic medium is in a sense coincidental (even if they both have their roots in the underlying processes of

technological, philosophical and political change which define the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), the two quickly fall into a complex relationship. The photographic image comes to play a vital role in the articulation and affirmation of the nation state. It allows for the 'visual enactment' of the nation, to borrow David Campbell's term (2007: 380), a performative staging, or making visible, of the nation to and for itself. Essential to this process is the staging of the nation's spaces.

Susan Buck-Morss (2002: 22) has observed that 'space has absolute priority in the political imaginary of nation states'. The nation depends on its ability to assert and maintain its spatial identity and unity, to define and protect the frontiers which give it that unity, and deploys a range of representational strategies in order to do so. While the most well developed and sophisticated of these strategies is territorial mapping, photography soon showed itself to be a particularly effective tool for the exploration, expression and display of the spaces constituting the nation. The most obvious indication of this is the early emergence in the established and developing nation states of Western Europe of a landscape tradition inherited from painting. Jens Jäger has argued that if landscape photography quickly gained currency in nineteenth-century Britain, it was in large part thanks to an already well-established ideological investment in the notion of landscape as reflection or expression of the national character (Jäger 2003: 118). And while, as he suggests in the case of Germany, the relatively uneven spread of the tradition at the time was a sign that such ideologies were less well developed in other national contexts, it is nevertheless the case that as the nineteenth century progressed, landscape photography began to impose itself internationally as the dominant mode in which the spaces of the nation were staged: its most obvious manifestation in the twentieth century is to be found in the landscapes of Ansel Adams and their assertion of the epic scale of the United States.²

Travel, of course, plays a central role in the recording and the shaping of a sense of space. The very act of photographing the nation's landscapes, the physical displacement required in pursuit of them, enacts a sense of space and spatial diversity. Covering and surveying the ground of the nation provide a set of co-ordinates which bring its spaces into the purview and consciousness not only of the government, but also of the broader community. Indeed, such photographic voyages are often carried out in the mode of exploration and adventure, an idea reflected in the term 'mission' which has been used to describe a number of such photographic expeditions in France, from the 'Mission héliographique' of 1851, to the 'Mission photographique de la DATAR' and Depardon's own 'Mission France'. They are journeys into the unknown, led by photographers whose aim it is to bring to light new discoveries. Depardon himself draws on the discourse of exploration and discovery to describe the aims of his latest 'mission': 'mon but est de donner à voir les régions les moins fréquentées, celles que nous rêvons de visiter un jour. Et de m'approcher de celles que nous fuyons de peur de découvrir une réalité moins romantique' ['my aim is to bring to light less frequented parts of the country, places we might dream of visiting one day, and to investigate more closely those we shy away from for fear of discovering a reality which is less romantic'].³ In many ways, the expeditions undertaken by a number of photographers over the past decades, whether it be Walker Evans in *American Photographs* (1938) or Robert Frank

in *The Americans* (1959), can be seen as the photographic equivalent of the road trip in cinema, insofar as the physical act of displacement in space, the journey into unknown territory, becomes a question not just of geographical but also of metaphysical discoveries, of shifts in knowledge and understanding to be experienced not just by them but by those who view their images.⁴

Indeed, it is in the work of photographers such as Robert Frank where we can identify the second mode in which the nation and national identity can be articulated and enacted, namely by foregrounding and portraying the people who constitute the nation and populate its spaces. The technique is exemplified in the French context by the work in the 1940s and 1950s of so-called 'humanist' photographers such as Robert Doisneau and Willy Ronis. Despite the fact that their images typically focus on a relatively narrow sector of the population at a specific time – the predominantly white working classes living in and around Paris in the postwar period – they have come to have wide and enduring appeal, thanks in particular to popular presentations of their work which often serve to play out and reinforce established moral and social values, and encourage recognition and identification on the part of the viewer as they do so.⁵

The relationship between photography and national identity also inevitably begins to implicate the nation state itself at some point, not least because, as Depardon's own project would suggest, it is very often only the state which is in a position to finance any systematic or extensive photographic exploration of the spaces over which it has dominion. As John Tagg has argued, for example, the United States Farm Security Administration (FSA) project of the 1930s, which mobilized a team of photographers to record the effects of the Great Depression on America's rural economy, can be understood in terms of the instrumentalization of documentary photography by the state in order to negotiate a potentially catastrophic political crisis (Tagg 1988: 153–83). Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites have discussed how certain images from the FSA project, such as Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant mother' photo, came to play a central role in the construction and management of civic identity and civic responsibility in America by triggering processes of interpellation and recognition in the viewing public (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 53–67).

Likewise, the history of modern France is punctuated at various points by a turn to photography on the part of the state and its institutions as a means by which national identity can be articulated and asserted. Indeed, the Commission des monuments historiques, an agency established by the French government in 1830 to inventory and safeguard the nation's architectural heritage, was quick to recognize the potential power of photography as it embarked on its task. Its second director, the writer and historian Prosper Mérimée, commissioned the 'Mission héliographique' from a pioneering group of photographers (including Gustave Le Gray and Henri Le Secq) in 1851. Mérimée's decision to send out a survey team to record and catalogue the nation's patrimony was undoubtedly an acknowledgement of the benefits photography could bring to scientific and archival endeavour; but the visualization and drawing together of the nation's monuments through photography could also serve as an effective reminder of its history and cultural heritage at a time when it was

living through a period of political instability and the state was struggling to assert its legitimacy. The material traces of the past gathered by the photographic survey act as visible evidence that the nation, rather than being the result of an arbitrary combination of lines on a map, has real historical and cultural substance.⁶

In other words, the relationship between photography and national identity is more often than not a politicized one. To make a portrait of a nation is to make an intervention in the public sphere, to make public the state of the nation through photography. And this is indeed how Depardon understands his mission. In an interview with Michel Guerrin given at the start of the project, he aligns himself with the 'French school' of street photography (Guerrin notes that amongst the books Depardon has taken with him on his trip is a copy of Evans's *American Photographs*). The American photographers, argues Depardon, were conscious of their place within a broader national territory, and set out to portray the frameworks and structures they saw around them (Guerrin 2004: 28). Like them, he says, his focus is on the territory of the nation, on the various ways in which the spaces of the nation have been modelled and transformed, and on the relationship between those spaces and the humans who have come to occupy them. In doing so, his aim is to reveal something about the nation to his fellow citizens, to make them see something that has so far escaped them: 'être politique, c'est encore révéler ce que l'on ne voit plus' (Guerrin 2004: 28) ['to be political also means revealing what we can no longer see']. The question becomes, of course, what techniques are used in order to bring the nation to light, and to reveal what can no longer be seen. At the same time, the project is also inhabited by an important tension, one faced by a number of photographers before him; for while Depardon may lay claim in his project to a certain political freedom, the right to cast over his country the independent eye of the artist, the project's status as a government commission risks placing it in a tradition which sees photography instrumentalized by the state. In what ways might Depardon's mission negotiate or succumb to this tension?

Depardon's France: politics, territory and visual enactment

From the outset, Depardon insisted on the political and social context in which his mission would unfold: 'je constate, depuis quelque temps, que les Français vivent mal. Ils sont malheureux, souffrent, parlent de taxes, de la dégradation des relations' (Guerrin 2004: 28) ['I have noticed for some time that the French are not living well. They are suffering and unhappy, talk about taxes and the about the breakdown in relations between people']. His portrait of contemporary France would in many respects be a portrait of a country in crisis. In 2004, the country was still coming to terms with the shock of seeing a Far Right candidate reach the second round of presidential elections in 2002, and it would express its discontent again with the rejection of the European constitution in a referendum in 2005. Yet while Depardon's concern might be with the current mood of the French people, he makes the striking decision at the start of the project to focus not on them, but on the spaces in which they live: 'montrer le sol et le ciel, une France à hauteur d'homme. Pas des gens, car

ils empêchent de voir une façon de vivre et une organisation sociale' (Guerrin 2004: 28) ['show the earth and the sky, France from the point of view of someone on the ground. Avoid showing people though, because they prevent you from seeing ways of life and social structures']. It is precisely by ignoring members of the nation's community, by excluding them from the frame, suggests Depardon, that we can grasp more clearly the ways in which their lives as part of that nation have been structured and organized.

The politics of Depardon's project is thus to be found in its exploration of the nature of space in contemporary France. His subject is what he terms 'le paysage politique' (Guerrin 2004: 28), the notion of 'political landscape' understood for once here in a literal rather than a figurative sense: the different ways in which the physical landscape has been transformed by political action; the processes by which the nation has shaped and inscribed the geographical space which it has claimed as its territory; and the often problematic relationship between the spaces it creates as a result and the people who live in them. At stake in particular is the relationship between the local and the national, and the way in which different localities are melded together to form a larger geo-political entity. For as Depardon himself observes, 'ce bistrot, cette rue sont rattachés à quelque chose de plus grand, de central, qui s'appelle un territoire' (Robert-Diard 2005: 14) ['this café and that street are part of something bigger, an overarching organization we call a territory']. His work draws our attention to the ways in which individual places or locations are incorporated into the space of the nation, and carry the traces of the broader frameworks and structures of which they are part.

A preoccupation with the nature of space, and a desire to map and delineate space, can in fact be seen as a recurring theme in Depardon's work. His filmic studies of hospitals (*Urgences* [1988] [*Emergencies*]), courts of law (*10e chambre – Instants d'audience* [2004] [*10th District Court*]) and mental asylums (*San Clemente* [1982]) reflect a Foucauldian concern with the institutional spaces and frameworks of human societies, and the relationship between individual subjects and the broader social and symbolic structures which they inhabit and which constitute them. His desire to map the territories of symbolic and discursive human action is echoed by a corresponding interest in the nature of physical space, the ways in which humans have modelled, shaped and transformed the world around them, and the ways in which space is affected by time and change. He explores this interest most extensively in *Errance* (Depardon 2000) [*Wandering*], a collection of images whose title foregrounds the itinerancy which is central to his activity as a documentary photographer. His sensitivity to the nature of human action on space is made clear in the opening sequence of images, which depict highways making geometric incisions through otherwise pristine landscapes. At the same time, Depardon also acknowledges his constant fascination with what he terms 'zones intermédiaires' (Depardon 2000: 142), that is to say, spaces of change and transition, spaces where processes of change are particularly visible. Spaces such as these are once again the focus of his attention in the 'Mission France' project.

For the most part, the world he portrays is the provincial France of small- and medium-sized towns in a largely rural setting. If he decides for the most part to avoid the large towns and cities, it is because the provinces are where the tensions between

different sorts of space are expressed most clearly. In the cities, he argues, the homogenization of space is much more advanced: 'les grandes villes ne m'intéressent pas: elles sont trop semblables, les centres-villes sont franchisés, il y a partout les mêmes enseignes, les mêmes magasins et à l'extérieur, ce sont les mêmes banlieues' ['I am not interested in the cities: they all resemble each other, with the same shop franchises in the centre and the same suburbs on the outskirts'].⁷ While his images capture the numerous examples of regional architectural styles to be found in different parts of the country, such as the half-timbered housing of the Alsace, we soon become aware of their coexistence with other sorts of space. Depardon draws attention in particular to the uniform and geometric spaces which are an increasingly common site on the edge of mature urban centres. With their standardized architecture of metal sheds housing supermarkets, shopping centres and light industrial units, these are the generic spaces of advanced capitalism, served by an equally generic infrastructure of roads, junctions and roundabouts which binds them to the transport network and enables them to function as part of the national economy.

Depardon depicts one such space in a photo taken on the outskirts of Colmar in the Alsace region. The foreground of the image is dominated by a collection of road signs on the approach to a roundabout, with the town's boundary and identity indicated by the red-bordered rectangular sign which marks the entrance to every town and village in France. To the left of the roundabout, and stretching back towards the horizon, is the long, low windowless building of an electrical goods retailer; and the relative newness of the space is further suggested by a sapling which takes up the foreground on the right-hand side of the image. Perhaps the most curious feature of the scene is located on the roundabout itself, where stands a reproduction of the Statue of Liberty, unveiled in 2004 to mark the centenary of the death of Auguste Bartholdi, its sculptor and a native of Colmar.

We are presented with a space which is standardized, with a road layout and street lighting which undoubtedly conform to national, or perhaps European, safety norms, yet at the same time is disorienting and vaguely sinister. In the first instance, this impression is an effect of the composition of the image: the proliferation of verticals (street lamps, sign posts) scattered unevenly across the scene disrupt our attempts to read and comprehend the space before us. But a sense of unease is also to be found precisely in the anonymity of the space, its reproducibility: were it not for the road sign indicating our arrival at Colmar, or perhaps the presence of the statue on the roundabout, it is unlikely that we would be able to identify the geographical location of this space with any certainty. It could be on the periphery of any town in the country. Even the presence of the statue, which is clearly intended to assert some sort of local specificity and civic identity, cannot be relied upon to perform that function for those who are unaware of its relationship with Colmar. It is a landmark which is so strongly tied to a particular place, and whose symbolic meaning is so great, that it serves, ironically, to render the space in which it is transplanted even more abstract, and underline the degree to which it is disconnected from its context.

Overall, Depardon's portrait of French territory leaves us with an impression not just of the uneasy coexistence of different sorts of space, but also of the steady

encroachment of generic or standardized space on older and more heterogeneous space – space in which the signs and traces of history have had time to accumulate. Thus, in one image, we see a nineteenth-century *calvaire*, or wayside cross, stranded in the midst of an industrial and retail park. It seems, therefore, that his staging of the nation's spaces invites us to acknowledge that the mood of malaise he perceives as he tours France may well have its origins in the collision of tradition and modernity which the country continues to negotiate, and stands as a critique of the obliteration of the particular by the general, and the negation of the local by the national. Yet as the project has taken shape and unfolded, its status as critical and political enactment of the French nation has in fact been contradicted in a variety of surprising and revealing ways by its reception and mediation on the ground. This contradiction can be traced to the problems posed, paradoxically, by photography's increasingly legitimate status within French culture, and the growing institutional pressures placed on it.

Calling the tune: regional identity and recuperation

Depardon's study can be understood first and foremost as an exploration of the tensions inhabiting the national space of France, and the ways in which national identities and pressures impinge on and inflect the local. His peregrination around the country highlights the antagonistic relationship between the generic and the specific, and the gradual victory of the former over the latter. It is also intended to challenge the dominant ways in which the spaces of the nation are imagined. Chief among these is a celebration of regional identities and characteristics, all of which are seen as contributing to the richness of the national culture. Depardon sets out, as he puts it himself, to 'déjouer les frontières imaginaires – "la fantastique Savoie", la "Bretagne éternelle"... À ces poncifs répond une standardisation des esprits mais aussi du territoire' (Guerrin 2004: 28) ['call into question the country's imagined geography – "Fantastic Savoie", "Eternal Brittany"... These clichés are contradicted by the standardisation both of the territory and of mentalities']. It is ironic, therefore, that the way in which the project has unfolded since its inception can in fact be seen to have reasserted the dominant spatial ideologies at work in the French nation. In the first place, Depardon's examination of the relationship between the local and the national has been played out precisely at the regional level. His mission has taken shape not only through his exploration of different parts of the country, but also through the staging of exhibitions in each of the regions he has visited. Moreover, each of these exhibitions has received promotion and financial support from the relevant regional and local councils. As the project has been mediated and constructed at the regional level, the meanings and readings of his images have often come to be inflected in various ways. In the case of the Alsatian leg of the mission, for example, we can see how the Press material which accompanied the exhibition oriented its reception around the themes of regional difference and specificity. In an interview with the region's Press officer, Depardon celebrates the particular charms of the Alsace: 'j'ai trouvé l'Alsace très bucolique, très agréable à vivre. Les Alsaciens sont les gens les plus gentils et les plus accueillants que j'ai rencontrés sur le territoire' ['I found

the Alsace to be very pastoral, a very nice place to be. The people of the region have been the kindest and most welcoming of all those I've met around the country']⁸.

A sense of regional identity is further reinforced by the images selected to represent the exhibition. Most notably, the cover of the press pack is dominated by a colour photo of a traditional Alsatian half-timbered house, in front of which is parked a Citroën 2CV. This image permits a number of readings which facilitate its re-inscription within the dominant discourses of regional and national identity. On the one hand, it can be seen to assert regional identity by emphasizing an architectural style which can be recognized without difficulty by the viewing public (both local and national) as Alsatian; but on the other, the presence of the 2CV, a car which has become an icon of French engineering and design, simultaneously reminds the viewer of the region's place within a broader national framework – a reassertion of national identity which is all the more important for a region whose place within the French nation has historically been far from secure. The visual and textual clues we are given by the exhibition's publicity material therefore encourage certain interpretations (a celebration of Alsatian specificity which can be recognized within the context of a shared national culture and history, whose structuring presence is neatly symbolized by the fact that the 2CV is parked in front of the house) while other, more problematic readings (those which might see the specific threatened by the generic) recede into the distance.

The second way in which Depardon's project plays out the spatial ideologies of the nation is in its very journey around France. After having passed through the provinces, it will conclude with a totalizing exhibition to be held in Paris, in which a selection of the images Depardon has accumulated will be displayed. In responding to the gravitational pull of Paris, Depardon acquiesces to the political, cultural and social hierarchy which reigns in France, orienting the nation around the capital as its bureaucratic nerve centre, and subordinating the provinces to it. Indeed, Depardon himself seems only dimly aware of the logic in which he is caught up. In an interview with regional television news to mark the opening of the Burgundy leg of the mission, Depardon expresses his pleasure that the local people have had a chance to see his photos before they reach Paris;⁹ but what he fails to point out, of course, is that unless they take the trouble to go to Paris and visit the final show, they will be deprived of the global vision of the nation which will be afforded to their fellow citizens in the capital.

France's Depardon: photography and the cultural order

In many ways, the tensions which have emerged as Depardon's mission has unfolded – and which have resulted in particular as his work has been mediated through the cultural and bureaucratic institutions of the French regions – can be traced to its ambiguous position as a state-sanctioned and state-funded project. Yet at the same time, and somewhat ironically, that position itself testifies to photography's relative success in laying claim to artistic and cultural legitimacy in France in recent years. This success can trace many of its roots to the DATAR project of the 1980s. As Gaëlle Morel has made clear, the DATAR project in effect served two legitimizing

functions. On the one hand, it provided a relatively new government agency the means to valorize both its activity and the outcome of that activity. On the other, it lent financial and institutional support to a practice which continued to occupy a marginal position within the field of cultural production. It did so in particular by defining itself from the outset as an explicitly artistic undertaking, and describing in auteurist terms the group of photographers who took part: their singular way of seeing the country would be central to the project's integrity (Morel 2006: 62–8; see also Guigueno 2006).

Perhaps the most significant difference between the DATAR project and the 'Mission France', separated as they are by twenty years, is the shift in emphasis from the group to the individual. The DATAR project enabled photographers to lay claim to and consolidate their status as artists or *auteurs*. The fact that Depardon alone is responsible for the 'Mission France' indicates not only that such a status now appears beyond doubt, but also that the authorial perspective is deemed to have an inalienable validity. It would seem that the authority of the vision offered by the 'Mission France' lies in its very singularity. The veracity of its portrait is guaranteed precisely by the fact that the author of the work is Raymond Depardon, a photographer who, through his work over the years, has managed to establish the singularity of his perspective, and has had that singularity recognized and endorsed by a cultural order in which such an understanding of the creative act is at once paramount and for the most part unquestioned.

Such investment in, and reliance on, the visual powers of a single photographer signals an important historical shift in our relationship to photography, and our understanding of its truth value. In the nineteenth century, as Schwartz and Ryan observe, that relationship was defined above all by an investment in its powers of objectivity (Schwartz and Ryan 2003: 3). The camera showed us what the exotic places to which adventurers travelled were 'really like'. What counts now, very often, is less a sense of photography's objectivity than the uniqueness of a vision which can be relied upon to see things that the rest of us cannot. Faith in the possibility that the photograph allows us to see things as they 'really are' – a faith born out of our continued investment in the indexical qualities of the photographic image – arguably remains the common denominator of the two positions; but the guarantor of that visual truth has come to be the operator of the apparatus as much as the apparatus itself, as if our Romantic faith in the power of the artist has overtaken our rationalist faith in the power of the machine.

Yet simultaneously, and paradoxically, at the very moment at which we look to photography to speak the truth about the world, we also find in it ways of misrecognizing the world as it 'really is', of seeing the world how we imagine it or want it to be, and all the more so if that world is living through a moment of crisis. As the mediation and reception of Depardon's images of the Alsace would suggest, it is a function which Depardon, albeit despite himself, may well have come to fulfil through his 'Mission France'; and in doing so, he will have revealed as much about the role of photography within the French cultural order as he will about France itself.

Notes

1. Interview with Raymond Depardon, France 3 Bourgogne, broadcast 22 June 2007. This and all subsequent translations are my own.
2. On the relationship between landscape and national identity in the American context, see Clarke (1997: 58–67).
3. 'Exposition Raymond Depardon: un regard sur l'Alsace', Maison de la Région, Strasbourg, 1 December 2006–26 January 2007, press release, 5.
4. On the road movie, see Laderman (2002). For a discussion of the motif of the road trip in relation to Frank's *The Americans*, see Stimson (2006: 109–14).
5. On the role of the photography of Doisneau and Ronis in structuring French cultural memory in the postwar period, see Vestberg (2005).
6. On the 'Mission héliographique', see Boyer (2003).
7. 'Exposition Raymond Depardon: un regard sur l'Alsace', press release, 2.
8. 'Exposition Raymond Depardon: un regard sur l'Alsace', press release, 2.
9. Interview with Raymond Depardon, France 3 Bourgogne, broadcast 22 June 2007.

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